SHARED LEADSHIP IN ARTS ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT

There are thousands of arts organizations throughout the world providing a contribution to performance, exhibition and education in a range of different artistic activities, yet there is little research into the leaders of these organizations. There is some suggestion that leadership in arts organizations is not by a single leader, but is often shared. This paper explores leadership in arts organizations using in-depth interviews with 15 arts managers in Australia to determine how they are led. It found arts organizations used shared leadership, but not always by an artistic director and a general manager as was expected.

Key words: leadership, shared leadership, arts organizations, nonprofit,

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses leadership in arts organizations. Recent leadership and organizational behaviour writings have emphasised the need for research to be more concerned with context (Bresnen 1995; Bryman, Stephens et al. 1996; Conger 1998; Shamir and Howell 1999; Hunt and Dodge 2000; Rousseau and Fried 2001). Historically researchers have seen leadership as a function of an individual's characteristics and abilities (trait approaches) and actions (behavioural approaches) and have tended to disregard the context in which leadership takes place (Burns 1978; Rost 1991; Rost and Barker 2000). Gronn (1996:453) asserts that most leadership research has been dominated by categorical concepts of context where it is used as "mere background information about sampling and where the research was conducted". Although more importance is attached to context in some contemporary research, most leadership research still looks at individuals in isolation. Yet, ignoring context risks missing key factors which may assist in the further understanding of organizational leadership.

The particular context this study addresses is arts organizations. Arts organizations range from major performing arts or exhibiting centres with multi-million dollar budgets to small, cultural or regionally specific groups providing opportunities for artists and audiences in various fields including dance, music, theatre, literature, arts museums, new media arts and visual art/crafts.

Yet, both the arts industry and those who study arts organizations are limited in their ability to deal with the problems of arts leaders due to a lack of empirical research into the area of their leadership. While
some functional areas such as marketing have received considerable attention from researchers (Johanson and Rentschler 2002) there has been a dearth of comprehensive approaches to the problems of leading arts organizations. This is partly due to the lack of interest in the nonprofit sector, which includes arts, exhibited by management and organizational behaviour researchers (Lohmann 2001). Overall, there is little research into leadership in the arts industry.

LEADERS IN ARTS ORGANIZATIONS

Leadership of any nonprofit organization brings challenges that are more complex than those in a for-profit institution (Dym and Hutson 2005). Among those complexities, Drucker (1992) and Lyons (2001) suggest, is the fact that nonprofits have more stakeholders, their revenue generation is complex, they rely on volunteers to perform tasks, they have difficulties in judging organizational performance, and that they attach great importance to their values. Only recently have the basic concepts of management been applied to the problems of the arts sector and the majority of these studies represent the loose application of concepts from other disciplines by those writing about the arts rather than thorough investigation by management researchers.

Arts organizations appear to have a particular difficulty in that it is not always clear who leads them. Leadership roles often appear to be divided among several individuals, who may be artists, administrators, or arts supporters. Yet, the role of leaders in arts organization is relatively unexplored. Arts leadership is usually discussed in terms of best practice or the leading organization in a field, rather than relating to individuals in leadership positions (Tschirhart 1996). Any arts literature which attempts to understand leadership in the arts tends to discuss leaders of a particular theatre company, orchestra or museum and tends to be story-telling (Chong 2002; Soila-Wadman and Koping 2005), or refers to companies or orchestras which lead their field, county or region, rather than in-depth analysis of how the organization is led or how a leader leads (Ropo and Sauer 2003). Few articles are based on empirical research, most look at one orchestra, company, museum or gallery in isolation, and few attempt to analyse arts leaders in terms of leadership theory. Overall few conclusions are drawn about who leads arts organizations and how they are led. This lack of analysis is perhaps due to the fact that artistic organizations vary greatly in size, age
and their structure is influenced by their artistic endeavour. Orchestras, dance or theatre companies, art galleries or festivals can require different management structures, leading to different leadership dynamics (Evrard and Colbert 2000). Chong (2002) suggests that within arts organizations a separate structure may exist for creative and administrative activities, and Lapierre (2001) is quite definite that two leaders are necessary; the artistic director and the general manager. Lapierre (2001) also strongly asserts that the artistic director will run the organization, while the general manager will provide support. He (Lapierre, 2001) is firmly of the belief that the general manager must be subordinate to the artistic director, but other writers are not so definite (Bathurst, Williams et al. 2007; Eikhof and Haunschild 2007), with an alternate view being expressed that collaboration is necessary to ensure smooth running of any arts organization, and that may be of a range of individuals, not just the artistic director and the general manager (Bathurst, Williams et al. 2007).

**SHARED LEADERSHIP**

While leadership has long been viewed as the prerogative of one individual in an organization, a few writers, nonetheless, have been able to see leadership as dispersed, distributed or shared within rather than centred in one individual, using terms such as democratic leadership (Bass 1990), collective leadership (Burns 1998), shared leadership (Judge and Ryman 2001; Pearce and Conger 2003; Yukl 2006), dispersed leadership (Bryman 1996), distributive leadership (Brown and Gioia 2002) or distributed leadership (Brown and Hosking 1986; Brown 1989) to describe situations where leadership functions are believed to be shared. Other writers (Chityayat 1985; Stewart 1991; Stewart 1991; Gronn 1999; Heenan and Bennis 1999; Yukl 1999; Denis, Lamothe et al. 2001) have discussed this concept, calling it dual leadership, dual control, collective leadership, co-leadership, or the leadership (or management) couple.

Shared, distributed or collective leadership has received greater attention recently in the leadership literature (Pearce and Conger 2003). This attention is caused by two factors. First, it is linked to the criticism of modern leadership research specifically because it concentrates on the activities of individual leaders, and tends to give inordinate attention to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). For example, Yukl (1999, p. 292) maintains that there is a bias in modern leadership theories to “heroic leadership”, ignoring
the role of “reciprocal influence processes or shared leadership”. Secondly, shared, distributed or collective leadership is the subject of renewed interest because it sits comfortably in contemporary organizations, where the competencies required are often greater than any one person is able to possess (Gronn 1999) and where team structures and increasing empowerment of individuals is becoming the norm (Edmonstone and Western 2002). These changes result in a situation where leadership may no longer be exclusive to any one individual, but distributed among members of the organization. Yukl (1999) asserts that all leadership theories could be improved if they included the implications of shared leadership in.

Whatever the term used, notions of leadership involving more than one individual are common and Gronn (2002) proposes a definition of leadership which allows for a different interpretation of leadership from the traditional, one person, heroic leader. According to Gronn (2002, p. 427), leadership is “a status ascribed to one individual, an aggregate of separate individuals, sets of small numbers of individuals acting in concert or larger plural-member organizational units”. In other words, the process of leadership is not simply behaviour of an individual, but involves collaborative relationships and collective actions grounded in the shared values of people working together.

Nevertheless, the focus of much of contemporary leadership research is on an organization’s chief executive officer (Bresnen 1995; Yukl 2006). It is assumed that this individual will demonstrate and articulate the values and goals of the organization and it is at this level that the culture of an organization is defined (Schein; Kotter 1990; Schein 1992; Bass and Avolio 1993; Yukl 1999). A few writers, nonetheless, have seen that power and leadership in nonprofit organizations is not necessarily the province of one person alone, but can be shared, dispersed, or distributed (Pearce and Conger 2003; Yukl 2006). Bradshaw et al (1992) suggest that there are four distinct patterns of leadership in nonprofit: CEO-led, board-led, staff-led, or collective leadership. Murray’s (1998) study of nonprofit organizations found these four patterns in evidence in nonprofit organizations, with the larger and well-established nonprofits being the CEO-lead, defined as where decisions made by the CEO are simply ratified by the board. Smaller, and newer, nonprofits, especially those that are driven by volunteers, are more likely to be board-
led with the CEO providing information and support only. Staff leadership is evident in were highly-trained professionals work, such as hospitals, while collective leadership was more evident in organizations where consensus is the ideal and participants, whether staff or board members, had a strong need to be involved in decision-making. Arts organizations, therefore, could be led by their professionals, or they could be part of a collective.

**Shared Leadership in Arts Organizations**

Leadership in all nonprofit organizations, as well as those in the arts industry, has also been complicated by the need to respond to the changing nature of their operations. Current movements in the arts industry have reshaped the roles of organizational administrators and artists, forcing them, for example, to become more entrepreneurial and to focus more on the generation of revenue (Griffin 2003; Mulcahy 2003). This situation in arts organizations is complicated by the fact that they often have a managing director, CEO, administrator (or similar role) as well as the artistic director. What is assumed is that the providers of services, the artists, and particularly the artistic director are likely to have a strong influence on the management of these organizations. Sometimes these roles are performed by one person, but there may be two people leading the organization, but from different perspectives. The artistic director in an arts organization has traditionally been viewed as the dominant leadership role (Lapierre, 2000). Coping with paradox is seen as a particular issue in organizations where creativity is required, as traditional management practices often clash with the thinking of creative employees (Murphy and Pauleen 2007), and it is often assumed that there is an inherent conflict between the artist and the business manager (Eikhof and Haunschild 2007). However, most of the literature is anecdotal and in reality little is known about how arts organizations are led. There are a few articles in the arts literature which points to shared leadership being used in arts as a method of dealing with their complexity (Reid 2005; De Voogt 2006). In fact, Reid (2005) and Pearce, Perry and Sims (Pearce, Perry et al. 2001) assert that shared leadership is institutionalized in some arts organizations.

Based on this information, a strong case can be made that arts leadership should be seen as distinct from leadership in other types of organizations and that leadership in the arts should be analysed separately.
The dual functions of guiding artistic endeavours and, at the same time, organizational administration, even in the best-run arts organizations, fosters structural complexity, competing sets of goals and multiple stakeholder claims. The distinct nature of arts organizations arises not simply from their artistic missions, but also from the complexity that multiple demands impose, particularly in a time where management and financial competence is demanded. This research explores a range of arts organizations to determine if there is a pattern of a shared leadership predominate. More specifically we address the research question: To what extent is leadership in arts organizations shared?

METHODS
The researchers undertook a larger study of leadership, decision-making and employment in the arts industry, using up to 20 organizations in Australia. This part of that study explores leadership in arts, using 15 of these organizations, seeking to ascertain if shared leadership is the norm. Qualitative methods were used because it was found that it is not always possible to identify who the leaders of arts organizations are. Annual reports and websites list a number of people in senior positions who often seem to be given equal status. Miles and Huberman (1994) and Marshall and Rossman (1995) suggest that qualitative methods are best when a researcher is trying to understand in-depth organizational processes, and particularly when the organizational phenomena and systems are poorly understood and/or ill-structured. This is an exploratory study because there has been very little research into leadership in nonprofit organizations and even less into leadership in nonprofit, arts organizations. The paper is based on qualitative empirical data and secondary data as these appear to have the greatest potential in exploring, describing and explaining leadership in nonprofit arts organizations. The interviews were confined to individuals in senior management positions. Secondary data was also collected from sources such as the organizations’ websites, annual reports and publicity material. The sample chosen began as a convenience sample; that is, the researchers selected interviewees based on personal interests or contacts (Babbie 1992), and were, for the most part, limited to two large cities. As a result, the organizations chosen spanned a cross-section of the arts industry, from art museums to
orchestras to a dance company and a festival, although there are more orchestras than any other activity. All organizations employed at least one full-time staff member, though most employed between 20 -100. The 15 organizations are outlined in Table 1.

Each organization was approached with a request to interview their organization’s leader, although in the process it was identified, and confirmed from a perusal of websites and annual reports, that it was not always clear who the organizational leader was. We note that not one request for an interview was denied, and all participants were extremely generous with their time.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews, based on an interview schedule, were used to explore ideas of leadership with the respondents. The interviewees were asked who led their organization and how they were led. The interviews were taped, transcribed and analysed searching for common themes and categories.

Table 2 shows the interviewees in each organization, but also indicates other leaders identified in the interviews and a perusal of websites and annual reports. The researchers made no attempt, or only a limited attempt, to insure that the sample is an accurate representation of some larger group or population. After the first interviews, a snowball effect took over as interviewees suggested approaching a friend or colleague (Babbie 1992).

To ensure construct validity, multiple sources of evidence were used within each case to enable convergence (Miles and Huberman 1994). For example, documentary or observed evidence was sought to complement and support statements from the interviews. As well, all interviews were conducted using a protocol to ensure internal validity. External validity is difficult in a study of 15 organizations as generalized conclusions are hard to draw, but studies of this size are rare in the arts industry. The data collection methods used were designed to ensure the cases would pass the test for reliability. A protocol was developed to ensure there were as many common elements to the studies as practicable.
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Bradshaw et al (1992) suggested that organizations may be led by a sole leader, the board, professional staff, or a collective. No organization was led by the artistic staff, as Bradshaw et al (1992) suggest occurs in with a staff of professional people. In most organizations studied, many of the professional artists were part-time, casual or on fixed-term contracts and had little say in the operation of the whole organization. There was some evidence, however, that the players in orchestras were vitally interested in the artistic direction of the orchestra, and also vitally interested in the financial affairs. Despite this, no interviewee suggested that the leaders came from the professional or artistic staff, except as part of a team including the CEO. Similarly, no organization was led by its Board.

This research found that the 15 arts organizations studied were led in two ways only. In three instances organizations were led by a sole leader, but predominately the leaders interviewed reported that they led as part of a collective. The collective was often two people, the artistic director and CEO, and in one case the CEO and Board Chair, however the larger organizations were led by collectives of four or five people including, as a rule, the artistic director, CEO and other functional managers. Some Boards were involved in decision-making, but as part of a collective. Collectives were the norm among the 15 arts organizations.

The responses of the executives interviewed when asked who leads their organization are summarized in Table 3 using three of Bradshaw et al’s (1992) categories.
Sole leaders

In this study three leaders reported that they were the sole organizational leader. The leaders interviewed in the Regional Art Gallery, the Specialist Orchestra and the Ballet Company were very clear that they were in charge. The Artistic Director of the Ballet Company stated that she was, “responsible for all activities”. She had a very strong reputation in her field and, while the company was quite large, she dominated its decision-making, both artistically and financially. All other senior staff reported to her. The Regional Art Gallery was a small gallery which employed only one full-time staff-member who filled the roles of both General Manager and Artistic Director. He stated that, “I am the general dogsbody. Some casual workers help and the volunteers who are part of the Board are great, but mainly it is just me.” The Specialist Orchestra was led by its General Manager (the CEO). He did not have sufficient skills to by the Artistic Director but had tried to run without an artistic director, using many different individuals in the role over time. These people often had other responsibilities or were busy overseas with limited time in Australia. The General Manager reported in the interview that he had decided “we needed a musician as artistic director”, and he had sought out someone part-time who could work with him: “I found a great musician I could work with.” The Artistic Director was part-time and reported to the General Manager.

Shared leadership: shared between artistic director and general manager

Five interviewees reported that their organization shared its leadership between two people: the General Manager (or similar title) and the Artistic Director. Three of these organizations were orchestras, the fourth, a large arts festival and the fifth, a theatre company.

The Schools Orchestra was led by both the Artistic Director and the CEO. The interviewee in this case was neither the Artistic Director nor the CEO, but an Artistic Administrator. She said of the two leaders: “They are kind of partners in a way. That relationship has to work or the company gets itself in a bit of a mess as has happened in the past”. The respondent also commented that “It’s always hard to serve two masters,” and that the other staff found it difficult, and she personally found that “I sit at the cross-roads between the artistic director and the manager”. While she felt there was not conflict between the two leaders at the time of the interview, she believed the situation did have the potential to lead to conflict...
between the leaders. In each other situation where leadership was shared by the General Manager or the Artistic Director, one or the other was interviewed. These respondents all reported a more positive view about shared leadership.

Three other organizations with shared leadership between two people, an Artistic Director and a General Manager were also Orchestras. The Training Orchestra and the Specialist Orchestra’s leadership was shared between an Artistic Director and a General Manager.

The Theatre Company interviewee, the General Manager explained her organization in this way:

... the way it works is a partnership. An equal partnership, even though on paper it may look like something else. And, it’s a balance between expertise. So yes, there are occasional moments when there are issues about authority or issues about decision-making. But the partnership needs to be strong enough to be able to manage those through, and if it’s not, then you dissolve the partnership.

Although the Theatre Company General Manager felt that leadership was shared, in a partnership, she was quite clear that if it did not work, and the partnership was dissolved, it would be the General Manager, in her case, who would have to go.

... unless the Artistic Director is doing something wrong with regard to the making of the art. The reason we do this is to create theatre. The person who creates the theatre and has the vision is the artist. And, unless their vision is taking the organization off to realms where it’s not going to survive, then the person who, in my view, has the most authority in that partnership, is the artist.

The Theatre General Manager also commented that:

I think the theatre industry --- is where you have the artistic director as the CEO, the general manager reporting to them, unlike opera or music, where you’ll find the General Manager is the General Manager, and the artists report to them. It’s (the theatre) an unusual model for the arts.

Shared leadership: shared between a collective of more than two:

The large Arts Festival was run by a collective of the Artistic Director and General Manager (the CEO) together with an executive team which included three department managers. The General Manager was interviewed and stated, “We are all here to support the artistic director in achieving his vision for the festival”, but qualified this by saying that artistic directors “came and went” about every three years and the management team is “the anchor if you like, for the whole organization.”
The Training Orchestra was also led by its General Manager (the CEO), together with a small team which included operations staff and the various conductors on short term contracts, although it was clear there was a considerable involvement from the Chair of the Board and occasionally other Board members. The General Manager, who was interviewed, praised the contribution of the Board Chair, saying, “She is great … she is my mentor” and acknowledged her contribution to “strategic leadership.” The General Manager spoke of the need to “manage upwards” and “harness the capacities of the board” which he found challenging as they were “accomplished professionals … concert masters or partners in law firms”. It was evident from his comments that the Chair was influential in day-to-day planning.

**CONCLUSION**

These cases suggest that leadership in arts organizations is more likely to be shared between two or more individuals. Only three organizations were clearly led by one individual acting alone, but the other twelve were led, either by a partnership of the CEO and Artistic Director, or a collective of those leaders and other senior managers. It was hard to identify a particularly pattern in leadership in different arts fields, though most orchestras did have shared leadership between a General Manager and an Artistic Director. Although this study is limited to fifteen organizations, their leadership is similar to that seen in many other small and large arts organizations throughout Australia, and the world.

We conclude that seldom do arts organizations have a single, dominant leader, with leadership often being shared by two people or flowing from a leadership collective. In those few instances where a single leader was dominant, in only one case was this the artistic director, a result which challenges Lapierre’s (2001) contention that a manager should always be subservient to the artistic director. Leadership in each collective includes, at least, an administrative CEO and an artistic director. This finding is atypical of cases cited in the leadership literature, which, for the most part, focuses on a single organizational leader (Yukl 2006). The leaders indicated that shared leadership worked in their organizations because of the recognition for different expertise and the willingness of all parties to make the situation work, despite an inherent potential for conflict.
Further research is needed to determine if this situation is the norm in all types of arts organizations. If this is the case, then more research is also needed to determine how this shared leadership operates. Gronn (2002), through his ideas on distributed leadership, suggests a model of how collective leadership might work, and there have been a few attempts to develop a theory of shared leadership (Yukl, 2009) but overall there is a lack of processual studies of leadership generally, in the nonprofit area, and in arts in particular (Conger, 1998).

This exploration of leadership in arts organizations shows a need to move away from prescriptions to analyses of actual leaders’ activities and styles. If shared leadership is shown to be the norm, then more in-depth, longitudinal studies are needed to understand how this works in practice. Future research should investigate their relationship to other leaders, and the characteristics of the organization and its environment which influence the appropriate leadership style.

It is unlikely that there is a single type of leadership which is suitable for all organizations, but those selecting leaders should be aware of the style of each candidate and what this implies for the arts organization. In particular it is necessary to consider the need for a leader to share leadership or at least, to work closely with another leader, or leaders, who may be driven by different goals. While some traditional leadership styles may be appropriate in arts organizations, this study indicates that, in these organizations, leadership is often shared by two people, or a collective, and this brings different realities for arts leaders.
REFERENCES


**TABLE 1: THE ORGANIZATIONS STUDIED**

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<td>Small Art Gallery</td>
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<td>Regional Art Gallery</td>
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<td>Large Arts Festival</td>
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<td>Museum Complex</td>
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<td>Training Orchestra</td>
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<td>Organization</td>
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<td>State Theatre Complex1</td>
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### TABLE 3  DOMINANT LEADERS IN ORGANIZATIONS STUDIED

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<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Sole Leader</th>
<th>Board-led/Staff/led</th>
<th>Collective (shared) leadership</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State Theatre Complex1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chief Executive Director and four other directors</td>
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<tr>
<td>State Theatre Complex2</td>
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<td></td>
<td>CEO, Artistic Director and 4 venue managers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Large State Art Gallery</td>
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<td>CEO, Chief Operating Officer, Directors of collections</td>
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<td>Regional Art Gallery</td>
<td>AD/GM (1 person)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Small Art Gallery</td>
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<td>Artistic Director/General Manager, whole Board</td>
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<td>Large Arts Festival</td>
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<td>General Manager (CEO) and Artistic Director</td>
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<td>Museum Complex</td>
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<td>CEO and Directors (4)</td>
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<td>Schools Orchestra</td>
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<td>General Manager and Artistic Director</td>
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<td>Artistic Director and General Manager</td>
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<td>Chief Conductor, General Manager, Artistic Ops manager</td>
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<td>Artistic Director and General Manager</td>
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<td>Ballet Company</td>
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